

Incorporating YOUTH VOICE

INTO INSTITUTIONAL DECISION MAKING



No decisions about youth without youth

Young people should be at the forefront of all decisions to do with or impacting them, and youth input should be equal in number to the input of adults. This means preparing young people to be competent in high-level conversations around policy and practice, as well as allowing opportunities for young adults to shape crucial decisions.

Build genuine relationships

It's important to not only build networking skills among young adults to communicate and conduct themselves effectively in adult-centric spaces, but to do similar work with adults to ensure that they are able to communicate and build relationships with young people as they would with adults.

Ask, respond, and act

Adults should make an active effort to prioritize youth input, and commit to follow-through on ideas generated by young adults within the conversations. This allows young people to feel that their time and effort is being respected, and that they were really vital to the processes.

Informal and formal opportunities for leadership

Plan for young adults to have spaces to lead formally, to speak on panels or demonstrate their leadership skills, while also allowing informal spaces as well. Young people cannot grow into community leaders without the platforms to do so, and it's important to blend their role in adult-centric spaces as well as with their peers.

Balanced treatment, input, and validation

This entails that adults are valuing young people as colleagues in these spaces, that there is a balance in physical numbers, as well as in the reception of voices. Adults using affirming language, speaking in a way that is comfortable, and listening to young people without preconceptions of what to expect will lead to effective outcomes and enriching dialogue.

UNDOING ADULTISM

Adultism is the "everyday, systematic, and institutionalized oppression that young people face at the hands of adults" (Paul Kivel)

While the effective strategies listed on the opposite side of the page are crucial when working with young people, it is also important for adults to realize the smaller ways they generally interact with youth, and keep in mind the privilege they have in youth/adult situations. Young people who work in spaces that are supposed to serve them while constantly being condescended to, not taken seriously, or wholly ignored can never genuinely engage and contribute to the services designed for them. Think to yourself if the way you are talking to and interacting with youth mirrors the way you conduct yourself with adult colleagues.

Example: Adults being surprised at the quality of the input given by a young person, and coupling that with condescending language such as "You're so smart for your age!"



AVOIDING TOKENIZATION

Tokenization is the idea that "youth and young adults are used inconsequentially by adults to reinforce the perception that young people are engaged" (Freechild Project)

While having young people at the table does show some effort and low-level consideration for youth input, it is not necessarily requiring youth participation in the conversations, and can make youth feel like they are part of an "experiment" around youth engagement. It does not allow space for young people to shape the conversation, to give valuable input, or to collaborate with their peers around issues that effect a large population of young people.

Example: A young adult is asked by adults to speak on a panel where they will represent "youth voice", without input on what they would like to speak about, the opportunity to consult with peers, or understanding of their role.